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U.S. PATENT APPLICATION

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Invention: SPECIMEN-INSPECTION PREPROCESSING APPARATUS

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SPECIFICATION

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TITLE OF THE INVENTION

SPECIMEN-INSPECTION PREPROCESSING APPARATUS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 This application is based upon and claims the
benefit of priority from the prior Japanese Patent
Application No. 2000-196910, filed June 29, 2000, the
entire contents of which are incorporated herein by
reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

10 1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a specimen-
inspection preprocessing apparatus for automatically
preprocessing a specimen such as blood when a clinical
test is conducted on the specimen.

15 2. Description of the Related Art

In order to run a clinical test on a specimen such
as blood, the specimen should be preprocessed.
Conventionally, the preprocessing has been executed
manually by operators. The preprocessing for specimens
20 required in clinic tests is considerably complicated
and various steps for the preprocessing have to be
taken for a long time. For this reason, the operators
are likely to be infected with pathogen during the
preprocessing.

25 To automate a specimen-inspection preprocessing
operation has conventionally been considered as a
method of preventing the above infection. However,

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facilities to automate the preprocessing operation usually become considerably large. The costs of the apparatus increase and so do the costs of facilities because a large space is required for setting the apparatus. The above prior art specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus cannot be put to practical use for clinic tests that require that the apparatus be decreased in size, cost, and facilities cost.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An object of the present invention is to provide a specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus having the following advantages:

(a) A specimen-inspection preprocessing operation including a variety of complicated steps, in which an operator is very likely to be infected with pathogen, can be performed automatically.

(b) The apparatus can be formed compactly and manufactured at low costs. The setting space for the apparatus is small and the facilities costs thereof are low.

In order to attain the above object, the specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to the present invention is configured as follows:

(1) A specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to an aspect of the present invention comprises a desk-type housing and a plurality of specimen processing units arranged on the desk-type

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housing, at least some of the plurality of specimen processing units each include a rotary conveying mechanism.

5 (2) In the apparatus described in above (1), the rotary conveying mechanism includes a turntable having a plurality of holding sections on a peripheral portion thereof, the holding sections holding a plurality of objects to be conveyed such as specimen containers, a driving motor for turning the turntable, a turning control device for controlling the driving motor to temporarily stop the turntable when the turntable turns a predetermined angle, and carry-in/carry-out means for carrying the objects into/out of the holding sections of the turntable temporarily stopping after the turntable turns the predetermined angle, in
10
15 synchronization with a control operation of the turning control device.

20 (3) In the apparatus described in above (1), the plurality of specimen processing units include a master-specimen carry-in unit provided on a specimen operating surface of the desk-type housing, for carrying in a master specimen contained in a master-specimen container, a usable-region detection unit for detecting a usable region of the master specimen
25 carried in by the master-specimen carry-in unit, a stopper-removing unit for removing a stopper of the master-specimen container containing the master

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specimen, a slave-specimen container supply unit for
supplying an empty slave-specimen container, a label
issuing unit for preparing an identification label and
sticking the identification label to the slave-specimen
5 container supplied from the slave-specimen container
supply unit, a pipetting tip supply unit for supplying
a disposable pipetting tip, a pipetting unit on which
the pipetting tip supplied from the pipetting tip
supply unit is mounted and which aliquots, through the
10 pipetting tip, the master specimen from the master-
specimen container from which the stopper is removed by
the stopper-removing unit and then dispenses, through
the pipetting tip, a slave specimen into the slave-
specimen container to which the identification label is
15 stuck, a slave-specimen carry-out unit for carrying out
the slave specimen dispensed into the slave-specimen
container by the pipetting unit, and a master-specimen
container carry-out unit for carrying out the master-
specimen container after the aliquot operation is
20 performed.

Additional objects and advantages of the invention
will be set forth in the description which follows, and
in part will be obvious from the description, or may be
learned by practice of the invention. The objects and
25 advantages of the invention may be realized and
obtained by means of the instrumentalities and
combinations particularly pointed out hereinafter.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of the specification, illustrate presently embodiments of the invention, and together with the general description given above and the detailed description of the embodiments given below, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

FIG. 1 is perspective view showing an outward appearance of a specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a top view of the arrangement of respective processing units of the specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 3 is a schematic view of the structure of a rotary conveying mechanism of the specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a schematic view of the structure of a clot detecting unit of the specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a schematic view of the structure of a pipetting unit of the specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention; and

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FIG. 6 is a block diagram of the structure of the specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

5 (Embodiment)

Referring to FIGS. 1 to 6 appropriately, the structure of a specimen-inspection preprocessing apparatus according to an embodiment of the present invention will be described. In this embodiment, centrifuged blood (in which serum 1A and clot 1B are separated from each other by a separating agent 1C such as a silicon separating agent) is exemplified as a master specimen 1.

As shown in FIGS. 1 and 2, a desk-type housing 100 is formed in substantially the same size as that of a large-sized desk and has a specimen operating surface 101 that is located at a given height from the ground and in parallel thereto. The housing 100 contains a controller 102 including a CPU for controlling the entire apparatus and a driving mechanism 103 including a power supply section. The controller 102 is able to receive bar code information, sort information, aliquot/dispense information and the like from a host computer (not shown) in real time. The controller 102 is also able to transmit information of pipetting of the master specimen 1 and arrangement information of a (slave specimen 2) that is dispensed to the host computer

in real time. On a specimen operating surface 101 of the housing 100, the following specimen processing units are arranged together with a rotary conveying mechanism in addition to a display, a keyboard, a printer, etc.

FIG. 3 schematically shows the structure of a rotary conveying mechanism 200. In FIG. 3, reference numeral 210 indicates a turntable, 220 shows a driving motor, 230 denotes a turn control device 230, and 240 indicates a carry-in/carry-out means. The turntable 210 has on its circumference a plurality of holding sections 211 to 214 capable of holding a plurality of objects to be conveyed such as specimen containers 1 and 2. The driving motor 220 turns the turntable 210. For example, a stepping motor and a servo motor are used as the driving motor 220. The turn control device 230 controls the driving motor 220 such that the turntable 210 stops temporarily whenever it turns a predetermined angle, e.g., 90 degrees. The carry-in/carry-out means 240 includes moving arms 4 and 5 and robot arms 12 and 82, which will be described later. In synchronization with the operation of the turn control device 230, the means 240 carries an object to be conveyed out of a holding section of one turntable 210 (on the left side of FIG. 3) that turns at a given angle and stops and carries it into that of the other turntable 210 (on the right side of FIG. 3).

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Let us return to FIGS. 1 and 2. the master specimens 1 are contained in master-specimen containers (test tubes) 1T and the containers 1T are set in two master-specimen carry-in racks 11 (each containing 50 test tubes).

A master-specimen carry-in unit 10 sets a master-specimen container 1T in a carry-in position A of a turntable 21 by the robot arm 12. The robot arm 12 is provided such that it can be moved in the respective directions of three axes of X, Y and Z, which intersect each other at right angles. The turntable 21 is constituted like the foregoing turntable 210 and included in a clot detecting unit 20.

The clot detecting unit 20 detects a region in which the master specimen 1 can be used. The unit 20 includes a photo detector 22 constituted as illustrated in FIG. 4. The photo detector 22 detects a boundary surface between a clot 1B and a separating agent 1C of the master specimen 1, which is contained in the master specimen container 1T conveyed to a detection position B by the turntable 21. The unit 20 thus transmits the detected data to a pipetting unit 40 through terminals t1 and t2. In FIG. 4., reference numerals 22a and 22b indicate light-emitting and light-receiving elements constituting the photo detector 22, 1A shows serum, and 1P denotes a stopper for blocking the opening of the master specimen container 1T.

The container 1T of the master specimen 1, the boundary surface of which has been detected by the photo detector 22 of the unit 20, is turned and conveyed to a carry-out position C by the turntable 21. Then, the container 1T is set in a carry-in position D of a turntable 31 by means of the moving arm 4. The turntable 31 is constituted like the foregoing turntable 210 and included in a stopper removing unit 30.

The stopper removing unit 30 automatically removes the stopper 1P, which blocks the opening of the specimen container 1T turned and conveyed to a stopper-removing position E by the turntable 31, and disposes of it in a waste collecting box (not shown). Since the stopper 1P is removed and disposed of automatically, the master specimen 1 never brushes against an operator's body. Good work environment can thus be maintained. After the stopper 1P is removed, the container 1 is turned and conveyed to a carry-out position F by the turntable 31 and set in an aliquot position G of a semicircular turntable 41 by the moving arm 5. The turntable 41 is included in the pipetting unit 40. The unit 40 will be described later.

A slave-specimen container supply unit 50 stocks a number of empty slave-specimen containers (test tubes) 2T necessary for pipetting. During the pipetting, the unit 50 supplies the slave-specimen containers 2T to a

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label issuing unit 60 in sequence through a conveyor 51
of the unit 50. Since the slave-specimen containers 2T
are automatically arranged by the slave-specimen
container supply unit 50 and supplied to the label
issuing unit 60, they need not always be arranged and
set in the racks.

The label issuing unit 60 automatically prints a
bar code label 2R, which has the same standard as that
of an identification bar code label 1R stuck to the
outer surface of the specimen container 1T, on the
outer surface of a slave-specimen container 2T supplied
from the unit 50 in a position L on a turntable 61.
The turntable 61 is constituted as the turntable 210
described above and conveys the slave-specimen
container 2T to which the bar code label 2R is stuck,
to a position J.

As shown in FIG. 5, a patient's name PN as well as
a bar code BC is printed on the bar code labels 1R and
2R. Consequently, an operator can discriminate
specimens 1 and 2 visually and can be prevented from
making a mistake such as a mix-up operation.

The label issuing unit 60 includes a bar code
reader for check. When a printing error or an adhesion
error occurs, the unit 60 reissues a label.

A pipetting tip supply unit 70 includes a rotary
tip stocking table 71 for stocking a number of
disposable pipetting tips 3 as illustrated in FIG. 5.

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During the pipetting, the tips 3 are automatically sent out of the table 71 and conveyed to a position K close to the pipetting unit 40 through a conveyor 72 provided adjacent to the table 71.

5 The pipetting unit 40 aliquots and dispense a specimen using a pneumatic aspiration nozzle 42 (see FIG. 5) attached to a peripheral portion of the turntable 41 that is turning. As the turntable 41 turns, the nozzle 42 moves to positions N, G, J, ...
10 and stops at each position for mounting a tip, aliquot and dispensing of a specimen, and disposal of the tip in a sequential order.

 In the position N, a new pipetting tip 3 set in position K is mounted on the tip of the nozzle 42. In
15 the aliquot position G, the serum 1A of the master specimen 1 contained in the master-specimen container 1T is absorbed into the tip 3 to perform an aliquot operation. In the dispensing position J, the aliquoted serum 1A is injected into the empty slave-specimen
20 container 2T to which the bar code label 2R has been stuck to perform a dispense operation. The pipetting tip 3 is disposed of immediately before it moves to the position N again.

 In the foregoing embodiment, the aliquot and
25 dispense operations for specimen (serum) are carried out through the disposable pipetting tips 3. Therefore, so-called contamination between specimens is prevented.

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A slave-specimen carry-out unit 80 stores the slave specimens 2, which are dispensed into the slave-specimen container 2T in the unit 40 and moved to a position M by the turntable 61, in four slave-specimen carry-out tracks 81 (each containing 50 specimens) by means of a robot arm 82 that is constituted like the foregoing robot arm 12. The slave specimens 2 are sorted and carried out in accordance with the purpose of use. If the slave-specimen carry-out racks 81 are full, an alarm is issued.

A master-specimen container carry-out unit 90 carries out the master-specimen container 1T, which completes its aliquot operation and is turned and conveyed to a carry-out position H by the moving arm 5, to a position I close to two slave-specimen carry-out racks 91 (each containing 50 specimens) by means of a carry-out conveyor 92. The master-specimen container 1T conveyed to the position I is held in the racks 91 using the robot arm 12. The master specimen 1 of the rack 91 is carried outside the body of the apparatus. If the racks 91 are full, an alarm is issued.

The following advantages can be expected from the above embodiment:

1) A series of operations for specimens 1 and 2, such as carry-in/carry-out, issuance of labels, and pipetting, is performed automatically. Therefore, the specimens 1 and 2 are not likely to brush against an

operator, which is very effective in preventing the operator from being infected with pathogen.

2) Most of the processing units arranged on the desk-type housing 100, i.e., the units 20, 30, 40, 60 and 70 include rotary conveying mechanisms using turntables 21, 32, 41, 61 and 71, respectively. Even though the processing units are arranged close to each other, they can smoothly perform a carry-in/carry-out operation for the specimens 1 and 2 and the pipetting tips 3. It is thus possible to compactly arrange the processing units on the carry-in/carry-out surface 101 of the housing 100, whose area is very small, with the result that the apparatus can be decreased to the same size as that of a laboratory-table. Since, moreover, the structure of the rotary conveying mechanism 200 itself is very simple, the apparatus can be decreased in cost. Since, moreover, a space for setting the apparatus is small, the facilities costs can be lowered.

Additional advantages and modifications will readily occur to those skilled in the art. Therefore, the invention in its broader aspects is not limited to the specific details and representative embodiments shown and described herein. Accordingly, various modifications may be made without departing from the spirit or scope of the general inventive concept as defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.